# *Defence and Security Sector Reform and Parliamentary Oversight*

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Sofia, 2013

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*Abstract:* In the notes for a speech to the 84th Rose-Roth seminar of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly on "Afghanistan, Regional Security and the Future of International Cooperation," conducted in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 13-15 November 2013, the author outlines two reasons for failings of security sector reform efforts – inability to properly contextualize security sector reform initiatives and invalid assumptions regarding the power and shadow influence of some security organizations. He then identifies three features of successful reform designs, valid for every context: provide for political legitimacy of security and defence organizations and reform initiatives; emphasise integrity at least as much as effectiveness; involve civil society organizations.

*Keywords:* security sector reform, defence reform, oversight, integrity, civil society, Central Asia

**Тодор Тагарев,** *Реформиране на сектора за отбрана и сигурност и парламентарен контрол*

*Резюме:* В доклада си пред 84-я Роуз-Рот семинар на Парламентарната асамблея на НАТО на тема „Афганистан, регионалната сигурност и бъдещето на международното сътрудничество", проведен в Бишкек, Киргизстан, 13-15 ноември 2013 г., авторът представя две причини за неуспешни опити за реформиране на сектора за сигурност – неспособността усилията да се поставят в необходимия контекст и невалидност на основни хипотези относно мощта и сенчестото влияние на някои организации от системата за сигурност. Докладът представя три характеристики на успешни подходи към реформата, валидни във всеки контекст: политическа легитимност на организациите от системата за сигурност и инициативите за тяхното реформиране; подчертаване на интегритета поне в степента, в която се цели ефективност; и активно включване на организациите на гражданското общество.

*Ключови думи:* реформиране на сектора за сигурност, военна реформа, парламентарен надзор, интегритет, гражданско общество, Централна Азия

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## *INTRODUCTION*

There are dozens of documents and hundreds, possibly thousands of publications on defence reform, and more recently – on security sector reform.

Why then turn to the topic again in a knowledgeable and experienced audience like this one?

The first reason one can point to is the anticipated complication in the security situation in Central Asia after the withdrawal of the main NATO troops from Afghanistan next year. It will become more important to see effective local security and defence organizations, and this is likely to turn into one of the major prerequisites for regional stability.

Secondly, often donor countries and organizations are not satisfied, and on occasion seem frustrated with the results of their efforts and the efficiency of investments they make in building security institutions and facilitating the development of indigenous security and defence capabilities. Politicians are usually careful in the choice of language, but researchers do talk about "failings of the [SSR] model over the past decade."[1]

I think this audience needs to be aware of failures, and more generally, on the challenges of reforming security and defence.

Reasons for failings may vary across countries, donors, and the type of security agency they support.

One common denominator in our opinion is the inability to put security and defence reform agendas in proper context – political, societal, and security context.

At current, most international norms and guidelines on security sector governance and reform are based on the Western experience and reflect, without explicitly recognising this, the assumption that security and defence reforms would take place in a democratic setting resembling in many ways the Western model.

However, in a recent in-depth study Mark Sedra and co-authors pointed out that the approach to security sector reform needs to be

> more nuanced, reflecting the variety of contexts, actors and threats present in most reform contexts; flexible, in order to accommodate different approaches depending on contextual conditions and available resources; and more politically attuned, grasping the need to engage political realities and seek to shape them rather than work above or around them.[2]

Another implicit assumption is that as long as the security sector is placed under political authority, it will act in societal interests.

In Central Asia, however, as well as in other regions of the world, traditionally security organizations have been extremely secretive, non-transparent, acting with very limited accountability. In the turmoil of transition, that often led to expansion of their influence way beyond their security-related mandates.

Instead of elected officials controlling the security sector, in more than one case security agencies nominated politicians, with the consequent ability to influence their decisions and actions.

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[1]     Mark Sedra, ed., *The Future of Security Sector Reform* (2010), p. 27.

[2]     Mark Sedra, ed., *The Future of Security Sector Reform* (2010), p. 27.

Also, one would expect security agencies to serve as watchdogs against corruption. Instead, it was the security services which, through their solid business and media networks and influence over the judiciary corrupt the political system.

Hence, we need to recognise the limitations and the challenges in implementing security sector reform concepts with their origins in the 1990s, and to be modest in our expectations.

SSR agendas build on several basic premises and, therefore, while being modest, there are certain issues that need to be addressed in any context, involving oversight, as well as other important roles of parliament.

The three points which I intend to present to you today relate to the political legitimacy of the security sector, its integrity, and the role of civil society.

## *LEGITIMACY OF SECURITY AND DEFENCE ORGANIZATIONS AND REFORM INITIATIVES*

Security sector organizations need to be under control, and defence and security reform efforts need to be undertaken by a legitimate political authority.

Exercised by a representative government, such authority can reconcile diverse interests and reduce internal friction.

Importantly, it would be able to prevent abuse of the powers of security organizations. Certainly, the political construct and the exercise of political authority will differ between countries such as Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, not to mention comparisons to countries like Switzerland or Germany. Even so, a system of checks and balances has to be in place, to make sure that instruments of power are not used against political opponents or serve other group or personal agendas.

And finally on this point of legitimacy, no reference to past glory and valour can replace the need for transparency and accountability of security organizations to elected officials, parliament and, thus, to society.

## *INTEGRITY BEFORE EFFECTIVENESS*

My second point is that integrity concerns should come before the efforts to increase the effectiveness and strengthen security and defence capabilities, in particular from the point of view of donors. Often one can hear that a country needs more men in uniform with higher salaries, better weapon systems and equipment, and higher levels of training. This is of course important, but comes second, only after we make sure that security organizations will act in the interest of society, and not in partisan's interests, and corruption risks are minimized.

Efforts towards good governance and building security and defence institutions need to precede, or at least to go in parallel to the traditional types of security assistance. Otherwise, we may witness considerable increase of the burden on society in order to have capable security organizations. In hindsight we may also see that public funds or donor money serve primarily to enrich certain individuals and to strengthen their shadow powers, to the detriment of the overall stability of a country and a region.

The Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), along with NATO and other partners, has done a lot to identify good practices in enhancing integrity and reducing corruption in defence and security, and its publications are available in many languages, including for ex-

ample Dari. You can find in DCAF's publications numerous examples of good practices, including examples how your fellow parliamentarians are contributing to the integrity of the security sector and the military.

## *THE POWER OF CIVIL SOCIETY*

In efforts to reform security and defence organizations, we sometimes underestimate the power of civil society. This is key for reconciling diverse interests and providing representation in governance mechanisms in the search for long-term stability.

In addition, parliaments may engage civil society to seek expertise, alternative viewpoints, and to facilitate oversight of security and defence organizations.

During my visits to Kyrgyzstan I have been consistently impressed by the vigour and knowledge available in civil society organizations. The Governance and Security Sector Almanac,[3] written by representatives of civil society, that will be launched after this session, provides clear evidence in that respect.

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In conclusion, there is no 'one-fits-all' solution to security and defence reforms. One needs to maintain a local focus, to try to understand the fabric of society, and to devise a security sector reform agenda and constructs that take into account the specific context.

Challenges abound, but continuous involvement and interaction, including at the level of parliaments, will facilitate the strengthening of security and defence institutions and capabilities that are indispensable for the stability and development of the Central Asian region.

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[3] Aida Alymbaeva, ed., *Governing and Reforming Kyrgyzstan's Security Sector* (Geneva-Bishkek, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2013). The Almanac is available also in the Kyrgyz and Russian languages.